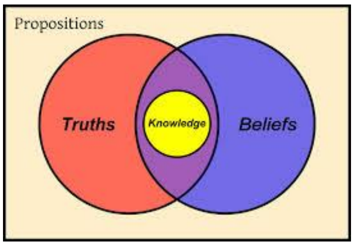
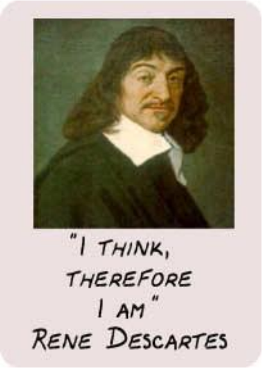
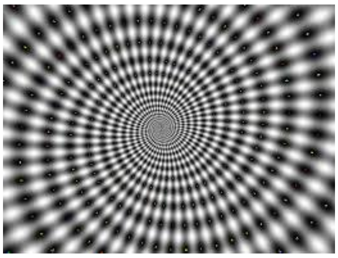
<u>Topic 1</u>
Introduction to epistemology









Welcome to Philosophy AS:
<u>Homework</u>
Please read the introduction and access the Prezi (link on the next page) and then read through the booklet trying the different activities.
When you finish reading and the activities tweet your comment to our twitter feed: @PhilosophyWhse
Please bring the booklet with you when you start next term. If you have any questions do email me: aforshaw@woodhouse.ac.uk
Have a lovely summer holiday!

Link to online presentation:
http://prezi.com/fxwucixdmgb1/introduction-to-epistemology-knowledge-and-scepticism/

Introduction

Epistemology is an umbrella term used to describe the study of philosophical problems underlying theories of knowledge. Epistemology attempts to answer important questions such as:

- Is knowledge possible or is it just belief?
- Is science truly objective and beyond doubt?
- Are there things we cannot doubt?
- How much evidence is needed for us to be certain?
- Can we trust our senses?

In this course epistemology is divided into two areas :

- reason and experience (3.1 Unit 1 PHIL1 – compulsory)
- knowledge of the external world (3.2 Unit 2 PHIL2 – optional).

Reason and experience is covered in this part of the course. Knowledge of the external world is covered in Part 2 of the course.

It is compulsory to study reason and experience at AS level (and indeed in a lot of university Philosophy degrees) because the concepts it focuses on are so central to the study of Philosophy as a whole – how we build ideas and how we create knowledge about the world.

Objectives

When you have completed this topic you should be able to:

- explain what philosophers mean by knowledge
- explain how scepticism undermines the search for knowledge
- explain how rationalism and empiricism attempt to solve the problem of scepticism
- explain what philosophers mean by concepts and ideas.

You will probably need about 2 hours to complete this topic.

What is knowledge?

Before we can start to explore the arguments developed by different philosophers in the search for knowledge, we first need to understand what philosophers mean by 'knowledge'.

Traditionally, there are three different types of knowledge:

- *practical knowledge*: knowledge that is skills-based, e.g. being able to drive or use a computer
- *knowledge by acquaintance*: knowledge that doesn't involve facts but familliarity with someone or an objects, e.g. I know my mother, I know what an apple looks like
- *factual knowledge*: knowledge based on fact, e.g. I know that the sun rises every morning – I know it is true.

Philosophers are mostly interested in factual knowledge because they are trying to understand how we can achieve truth about the world.

One of the first philosophers to attempt a definition of knowledge was the Ancient Greek philosopher, Plato. One of Plato's main concerns was to distinguish knowledge from belief. He gave the example of two guides, one who knows the road to a certain destination, and the other who just uses guesswork. Both guides arrive at their destination but which one is more reliable?

Most people would argue that the guide who has expertise is more reliable. This is why Plato argues that true belief gives us knowledge of the world only by coincidence. It is never really certain and could change at any time. For example, I may believe in aliens and aliens may actually exist, but if I cannot give an adequate reason for my claim. I can't really call it knowledge.

Plato argues that for a factual claim to be knowledge, it has to be a belief which is true and justified. His definition of knowledge is therefore that it is must be a **justified true belief** .
For example, I know that Paris is the capital of France if and only if:

- I believe it.
- it is true (Paris is the capital of France)
- I can give justification for my belief (e.g. I read it in an encyclopaedia).

Think about this in the first activity.

Activity 1

Read the following claims and decide whether they fit the criteria for justified true belief. Are they necessarily knowledge claims?

- Amy thinks that Great Britain is part of the European Union because she watched a documentary about it on television.
- Tom thinks that Great Britain is part of the European Union because Santa Claus told him so in a dream.
- Chris thinks that Mount Everest is 8848 m high because he read it in a Geography book.

- Anil thinks that Josh is in the library because he has just seen him in there.

Tom's claim for knowledge seems unlikely. It may be that Tom is correct in thinking that Great Britain is part of the European Union but his justification that Santa Claus told him in a dream, is weak. In fact Amy's belief seems more likely because her justification for believing that Britain is in the European Union seems stronger – she saw a documentary. Tom has a problem with the justification for his belief, whereas Amy's claim seems to fit the criteria for justified true belief. But does it? Documentaries can be wrong and if this documentary is wrong then her justification is also weak.

Chris's claim that he read the information in a Geography book seems strong justification for his belief in the height of Mount Everest. But is it? How do we know that Everest is 8848m high at this moment? The earth shifts and changes, snow melts and forms, rocks fall. Similarly, Anil has seen Josh in the library but is Josh still there? He might have seen Richard, Josh's brother.

You can see from this that although all the claims are justified true beliefs, they don't seem to be knowledge claims. There is a problem with justification. This is one of the main problems with theory of knowledge – can we trust our justification? Is it adequate or relevant? Can we ever be certain of anything? This is the area of doubt that scepticism focuses on. We will look at this next.

What is scepticism?

To be sceptical about something is to doubt or have reservations about a truth or a particular statement. Scepticism is also a philosophical movement. There are several forms of scepticism but they are all based on philosophical doubt: to what extent can we trust our senses? What can we know for certain? Can we know anything at all?

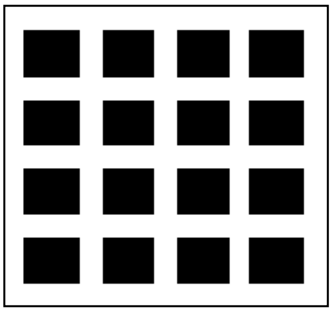
These are the classic arguments used by the sceptics:
[I think you should refer on to later topics where these are considered in more detail?]

- The **infinite regress argument**: for a belief to be knowledge, it must be true and justified. But how do I know my justification is final and can give me certainty? I would need to prove my justification right. This means that my justification has to be justified: the infinite regress is the idea that nothing can be certain because every belief needs to be proven true. This process goes on forever and is called the **infinite regress of justification**.
- Are our personal experiences/sense perceptions sufficient to establish what we claim to know? Is there a guarantee that what we see, hear, smell, touch and taste are beyond doubt? For example, clear-sighted people and colour-blind people do not see the same colours. Hot water to a cold hand can feel hotter than to a warm hand, and vice versa. People who have had a limb amputated sometimes still have sensations and even feel pain in the missing limb. Our senses can therefore mislead us about the nature of the world.
- Waking dreams: some dreams seem so real that we may find it difficult to distinguish between waking and dreaming experiences. How do I know I am not dreaming right now?

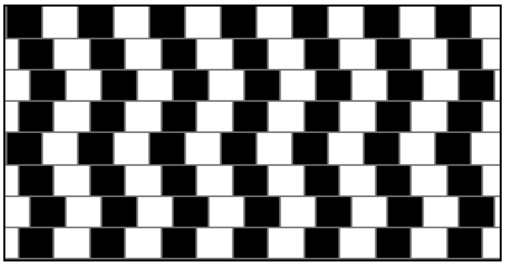
Activity 2

1. In what way do the following optical illusions illustrate the problem of scepticism?

(a) The Grid
Stare at the grid below for a few seconds. Can you notice anything strange happening?



(b) Sloping lines
Look at the picture below of sloping lines. Or are they?





(c) Old or young woman?

d) A straight stick dipped in water looks bent. Does it mean it is really bent?

2. In the film the matrix, a computer hacker learns about the true nature of reality: human beings are kept unconscious in pods and are fed sensations by machines. why is this an illustration of scepticism?

(It would be hard to make an activity illustrating the infinite regress as there isn't much background yet; I think this should make them understand why we can doubt our senses)

It seems that because there are some instances where we cannot trust our senses, we could reasonably infer that they deceive us all the time. This leads global sceptics to argue that knowledge is impossible because certainty can never be achieved. A famous Ancient Greek philosopher called Pyrrho of Ellis doubted every claimed piece of knowledge, and maintained that no one could know anything or arrive at the knowledge of truth. He carried his scepticism to such an extreme that his friends were obliged to accompany him wherever he went, to make sure he was not run over by carriages and did not fall down precipices.

But is Pyrrho's extreme scepticism really a tenable position? Common sense tells us that if we cross a busy road, we will get run over, that if we walk towards a cliff, we will fall and that walls don't disappear when we don't perceive them and the idea that we could be in the matrix and brains in a vat fed sensations by clever computers seems very unlikely.(addressed in activity, so it should work) A more positive form of scepticism is needed – one which can raise doubts or undermine theories but which also aims to prove what we know by producing clear conclusions.

The sources of knowledge as an answer to scepticism.

One way to solve the problem of the infinite regress and of scepticism as a whole is to think of beliefs that are self-justifying and/or cannot be doubted. Thinking about how we form knowledge claims about the world should help us do this. Try this in the next activity.

Activity 3

1 In the table write down on the first column four things which you think you know (factual knowledge). Then trace the knowledge back to its origins and write in the next column how you know each thing. We have provided a couple of examples are given below.

I know that …	I know this because …
Dandelions are yellow	I can **see** that their colour is yellow.
2+2=4	I can work it out in my mind

2 Look at the origins of knowledge claims you have identified in the second column. Do they have anything in common? (Short answer in the feedback and outline below.)

You should have worked out that most of your knowledge claims actually came from your senses. Human beings have five senses available to them:

- taste
- touch
- sight
- smell
- hearing.

For example, I know that dandelions are yellow because my sense of sight gives me a particular colour experience. I need to trust that my senses give me correct information about the external world in order to gain factual knowledge. Some philosophers argue that we have to believe that our senses are accurate most of the time and that we can actually distinguish between real experiences and illusions. For example I know that if I see a pond water in the middle of the desert, it is likely to be a mirage. Therefore, our senses can be the source of knowledge, even though they do not give us certainty.

But what about claims such as 2+2=4 or 'being good means treating others as you would like to be treated'? Do such claims ever relate to our senses?

It would be hard to claim that they do – some other process is involved which does not necessarily require the use of the senses. Philosophers usually argue that such ideas or concepts derive from thought alone, or what they call **reason.** I can work out from my mind alone that 2+2=4. I may have needed to be taught about numbers when I was a child but I do not need to physically see two objects added to two objects in order to work out that 2+2=4.
Knowledge claims derived from reason are very important in Philosophy because, if they are not derived from the senses, they are immune to doubt. Even if I doubt my senses, I still know that 2+2=4. [I don't think we have introduced the term sense experience properly yet – should we leave that until a later topic?] yes maybe

We can therefore see that two different sources of knowledge emerge:

- ideas that we gain from our senses
- ideas that we gain from reason.

It can be argued that these basic ideas are the basis of all our knowledge claims. This is shown in Figures 1.1 and 1.2.

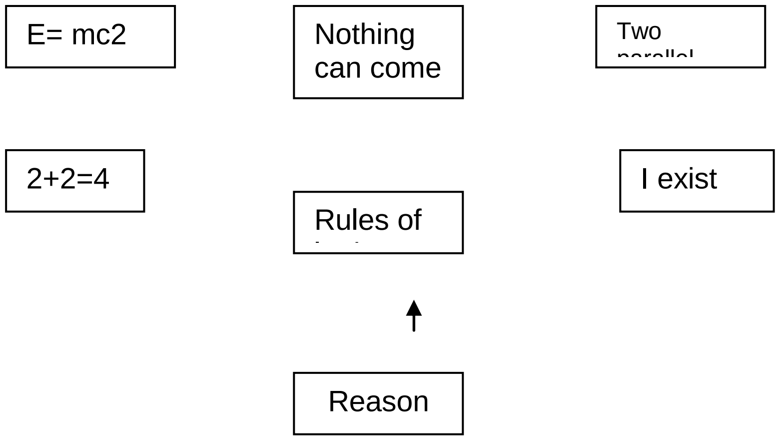


Figure 1.1 Reason as the source of our knowledge system

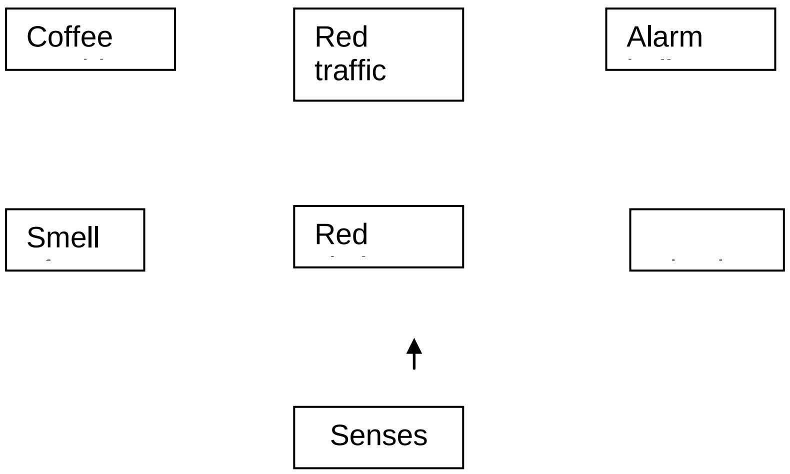


Figure 1.2 Senses as the source of our knowledge system

In the following three topics, we are going to look very closely at those two types of knowledge and link them to different philosophical schools. In topic 2 we are going to look at Empiricism which is the view that knowledge comes from the senses. In topic 3, we will look at rationalism, which is the view that our knowledge comes from our mind or our reason.

Rationalism and empiricism

Rationalism and empiricism are two opposing philosophical schools of thought. They both attempt to establish the source of our knowledge claims and to determine how we form concepts and ideas.

Rationalism argues that knowledge is based on reason whereas empiricism argues that knowledge is based on experience.

Rationalism

Rationalism originated with a French philosopher called René Descartes and gained popularity during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mainly in Europe. However, we can find rationalist ideas long before Descartes in the writings of Plato.

Rationalism is the view that knowledge does not come from the senses but from reason. As we have seen from the arguments of scepticism, senses can deceive us and therefore cannot be trusted to give us true and certain knowledge. Rationalists argue that instead we should derive knowledge only from our reason and logical abilities.

Empiricism

Empiricism was mostly developed by British philosophers from the seventeenth century. These philosophers were influenced by the developments in scientific knowledge from the end of the seventeenth century and the creation of bodies such as the Royal Society, which focused on discovering new ways to explain the world around us, scientifically, socially and politically. The key empiricists we will be looking at in this course are Locke, Berkeley and Hume.

Empiricism is the view that knowledge is derived from our senses. For example, I know what a red circle is because I have experienced through my senses the colour red and the shape of a circle.

Self check

Briefly explain and illustrate what the two main sources of knowledge which philosophers consider.

Summary

Knowledge can be understood in different ways, depending on how the verb "to know" is used: we have practical knowledge (knowing how to do something), knowledge by acquaintance (knowing someone or something) and factual knowledge (knowing that something is the case). Factual knowledge is what philosophers are concerned about: a fact is a statement that is true, and truth itself is one of the main concerns of philosophy.

Philosophers have focused some of their studies on building a theory of how we acquire and develop factual knowledge: this field of philosophy is called epistemology.

Factual knowledge in philosophy is usually defined as justified true belief: in order for me to know something, I must believe that it is the case, it must be true and I must have proof for my belief. However, sceptics have argued that knowledge can never be achieved, because justification is never certain and itself needs to be justified: this is called the infinite regress of justification. Scepticism is a philosophical position which argues that every knowledge claim we make can be doubted: for example, our senses can deceive us (an example would be optical illusions) and we may not even be sure that we are not dreaming right now or that we are fed sensations by a computer (like in the *Matrix* film). This means that, because we can question every

belief we have and question the evidence behind our beliefs, knowledge is impossible.

In order to address this problem, philosophers have looked at the source of our knowledge claims, to see if there was any belief that didn't need justification (as it would then stop the infinite regress). There are two main schools of thought with reference to this problem: rationalist philosophers argue that the mind can provide us with those basic beliefs (as I don't need my senses to know that 2+2=4), whereas empiricists argue that senses are the source of knowledge (I need my sense of sight to know that dandelions are yellow). We will look more closely at empiricism in topic 2 and at rationalism in topic 3.